

Losing Sight

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Summary: Filled with a powerful determination during the dragon attack that left him a widower, Stoick vows to keep the remainder of his family safe and to search for the elusive dragons' nest in hopes of finding (or avenging) his wife. But with his only son, Hiccup, growing into a calamity of a young ten-year-old, can Stoick fulfill his promises?

1. Chapter 1

Disclaimer: I do not own How to Train Your Dragon or any of its characters.

****Consumed with appreciation for the father/son bond from the first film, I have often wondered how Hiccup and Stoick's relationship mounted into what it became. Exploring the beginnings of the separation between them, Losing Sight was born. (Please note that there are spoilers regarding the second film as well.)****

****Prelude****

The rain drizzled lightly in the dark of the night, giving a faint and too familiar warning of the storm to come. The sky was beginning to gray as the first lights of day tried to squish through the thin rain clouds. In all, it was a dismal sight, but to a quite burly Viking holding a crying infant, it was a depressing view that he could not tear his eyes from. Stoick the Vast was the chief of the small village on Berk, a wide burly man with thick locks of red hair surrounding his tear-stained face. The infant he was holding surprisingly lightly was bundled in green fabric that made his bright eyes of the same shade pop. Blood from a fresh cut on the child's chin slowly ran down his skin and dripped towards the mud below. The baby gave a pleading wail towards the heavens, where his father's gaze was locked.

Around them, many disgruntled Vikings of various sizes and dispositions began heading back to their homes—or what was left of them after a dangerous night. Unlike most places of residence, the island of Berk was prone to dragon raids. The large serpents of all shapes and terrifying skill would consume the night with fire in search for the Viking's most valuable food resources: sheep and yaks. Usually ending with the dawn rising upon the smoking ruins of some Viking houses, these nights seemed to become more and more frequent as the winter came closer. The Vikings, though weary, had determined heads and loyal hearts when it came to defending their home. For generations, they had lived on this island and waged war with the dragons. Stubbornness aside, the Vikings prided themselves with their skills with axes and maces. A dragon-killing Viking was the only Viking on Berk.

Stoick was no exception to this rule. As chief of the tribe, he had even more to live up to than most. And live up to it he did. Never had he run from the dangerous beasts of the sky. Since he was a young boy, it was clear that he was to be a mighty dragon-slayer. Stoick was all too familiar with the crunching sound that pierced through the thick air when his hammer met a Deadly Nadder's tail. On more than one occasion, he had easily torn through the tough skin of a Gronkle with his mighty axe. And even more impressively, he had once triumphed over two Monstrous Nightmares with no weapons except his large and meaty fists. Stoick had always protected his village and his family.

But tonight had been different.

"Stoick! There ye are." yelled a peg-legged Viking man, limping up the hill towards Stoick and the whimpering baby. This Viking was squat and sturdy with a hammer instead attached to his wrist instead of a left hand.

"Waaaahhaaaaa!" the infant roared seeing a new source of potential affection wander towards them.

"I haven't seen ye since that crazy four-winged dragon came swooping down. Left its mark, I see." the blonde, one-legged Viking gestured with a twist of his replacement hand towards the ruins of a smoking house behind Stoick.

Stoick merely stared at the continuing blackening sky as rain started falling more heavily upon them. As one particularly thick drop fell squarely on the baby's nose, another cry burst from his tiny lungs.

"I think Hiccup here could use a warm fire right about now. Don't ye think?"

There was no answer from the unmoving chief.

"Right, well, I'm sure Valka will have something to say about this if Hiccup catches pneumonia. O' course, she'd probably kill you first after what happened with the forge incident. We're lucky the kid still has four limbs attached!" With a raspy chuckle, the blonde took Hiccup in his intact arm, and started heading down the hill.

"Come on, Stoick. Yer wife's surely waiting in the Great Hall. No need to stand here in the rain. Sure, ye gotta rebuild yer house...

But it was about time! I'm not gonna lie about that creaky door of yours. Oh-ho! And don't get me started on that fireplace of yours. Quite a bit of handy work that one, Stoick. Hmph, ye should really see about training some Vikings in small home repair... That'd be mighty useful... Hey! You should see the Hofferson's place! Ha! They've got it even worse than you! Monstrous Nightmare set the place afire. Got everyone out alright, but burnt to a crisp is that place-

"She's not there, Gobber."

At the sound of Stoick's voice, Gobber stopped dead in his tracks and turned to face his friend who was still staring at the sky. "Sh-she's not...?" Gobber closely examined his friend's bearded face, the cold child nuzzling into his chest, and then the smoking ruins of the home. Stoick continued.

"That four-winged beast took her." The sound that escaped his lips was no more than a whisper and barely audible through the wind that was beginning to pick up.

"Stoick!" Gobber tried wobbling over to the chief, but before he could, the red-bearded man tore his gaze from the now black sky, pulled out an axe lodged in a nearby beam, and threw it with all of his might into the opposite wall. The weapon found its new home with a mighty crack. Stoick, shaking and crying, soaking through his bear-skinned cloak and leather boots, melted to the floor and sobbed.

Gobber walked over and kneeled down next to him. Hiccup, full out of tears to cry, gave a little yell but stopped mid "Aaahhh!" to give a shuddering sneeze that left little green specks on the blond beard next to him.

Gobber ignored the mess as he tried to register what Stoick was saying. Valka. Gone. It didn't seem possible. She was always so bold and daring. The perfect example of a steadfast Viking. Well, except for her empathetic heart. That was not common-place among Viking-folk. She loved so strongly and deeply. She resonated with the whole village. She even spoke up for the dragons...but now... Gobber stared sympathetically at his friend with glazed eyes. "She was a strong woman. And she loved you both very much."

Stoick lifted his head slightly, looking down on the carved wood beneath him. "I couldn't save her. I promised to protect her. And I couldn't-

Stoick choked and couldn't continue. His tears fell with the heaviness of the rain, and the wind from the seas blew with a ferocity that could only be matched by the beating wings of a dragon. The village was dark except for a light coming from the doors of the Great Hall. The inhabitants of the village no longer muddled around the ruins of the raid, but sat huddled next to warm fires or slept soundly on fur-covered beds. All of them except for the huddled figures crouched atop the chief's ruined house.

Hiccup sneezed again, the rainwater mixing with the blood on his chin.

Stoick looked down at the boy.

"I was so focused on Hiccup." Stoick whispered. "He was scared. The dragon had already hurt him. But the monster clearly had its attention on Valka. If only I had seen that more clearly and ran for her instead-"

"Then maybe you'd have no family at all! " Gobber spat at Stoick. Gobber continued a little more gently, "Don't go taking any blame. Ye protected her son. Valka would be happy for little Hiccup to be alive." The little Viking in question gave a little sneeze that vibrated his whole little body.

"Though, he may not stay that way for long in this Thor-forsaken storm." Gobber finished.

"You're right," Stoick said as he rubbed his face clean with calloused hands. He reached for Hiccup again and cradled the mushy blob of baby fat and wet sheepskin in his arms. The Vikings rose from the mud and stood against the pounding drops that began to freeze into sleet. "I will protect you, Hiccup." Stoick whispered to his son, wrapping him in the shelter of his cloak. "Nothing can ever harm you. Not while I'm here. I promise."

He then turned towards his friend and said, "Head to the Hall, and round up the council."

"Wha-what for?" Gobber stammered. "It's barely dawn, we've all just gone through one of the longest dragon raids of the year, and we are in the middle of a wailing tempest!"

"Just do what I said."

Gobber was concerned by the quick change of tone in the chief's voice. He was about to question his friend further, but Stoick's stern expression and dedicated gaze sent him uneasily down the hill and towards the Hall.

With Gobber staggering far down the hill, Stoick lent himself one more gaze into the blackened sky and thought of the beasts that roamed in undeserved safety high above the storm cloud.

But they would not be safe for long.

Stoick's mind was sent reeling faster than the gusts that threatened to remove him from his path. Vikings had been searching for the dragon's nest with no avail for centuries so lost in mystery and dangerous waters was the dragon's home. Many a Viking and ship never returned from the various expeditions lead by the chiefs of the past. But now it was his time to attempt the hunt.

Stoick could feel Hiccup nuzzle closer to his chest as they headed towards the center of the village where the Jorgenson's home stood erect and safe in the storm. A perfect place to keep a chieftain's heir for the time being.

Weaving between homes, crushed fences, and the occasional lost sheep, Stoick the Vast grunted through the ferocious wind, "I promise, Valka. I will find you."

2. Chapter 2

"Brrrrrrmmmmmm!" A loud blaring pierced the ears of Stoick the Vast as he sat asleep in his favorite chair in front of a fire pit of embers. He had been sitting there since he finally called an end to the council meeting he had been conducting about the last failed dragon search only a few hours earlier. Ten long years had past since his first attempt at finding the nest. Although he always felt they were close, time after time he had returned to Berk with less confidence and less boats than he did when he sailed off. But his determination towards his long-coveted promise remained.

After many long days of running a village, Stoick would find himself dozing off as soon as he returned to the comfort of his home. From the daily worries and stresses of the life of a chief and single father, Stoick was usually an impossibility to waken. This was certainly not the case as the disorienting sound echoed in his skull. Immediately, Stoick awoke from his dream-less snooze and was filled with adrenaline as his dazed head registered the potential dragon raid that the horn alerted to.

As the alarm blared through the village, Stoick groped for his boots that sat near the fire. In the darkness, he yanked the leather onto his large feet. He stood in such a quick fashion that an average Viking would have acquired spotted vision and unsteady feet. Stoick, however, felt neither dizzy nor unstable as he grabbed the fur cloak that was draped over the back of the wooden chair. Fastening the cloak to his shoulders, Stoick stomped towards the door. Through a nearby window, he saw lights coming from many other homes. Stoick felt the familiar cool comfort of iron on skin as he reached for the handle of his ax. And now that the horn had finished it's violent blasts, Viking yells and the clamor of metal could be heard from inside the chief's house. Another familiar sound reached his ears.

Afaint creaking echoed through the room. Stoick turned around.

An extraordinary small boy was standing on the staircase that led to the second level of the Haddock home. Nervous sweat dripping down from the messy brown hair covering his head, Hiccup stared with bright green apprehension-filled eyes towards his father.

Hiccup had always been hesitant when it came to dragons. The frequent dragon raids would often send him wearily down the stairs towards his father. Stoick recalled the memory of an even smaller Hiccup running towards his father's leg and shaking nervously in his embrace. Stoick knew that a child's fear of dragons came from a safe instinct and that Hiccup of all Viking children had memories from which fear could flourish, but his son was now ten and needed to learn to bravely put aside his fear if he was ever to become a Viking leader.

Despite these thoughts, Stoick's heart skipped a beat as he watched his son's worrisome eyes and boney physic. He remembered a promise he had made long ago and wondered how such a small child could protect himself. For now, Hiccup would be under his safe protection. Given time, Stoick always imagined, Hiccup would eventually become stronger than any of the other Vikings his age.

"Stay inside." Stoick commanded as he grabbed his helmet from a nearby table and forced it on his head. The last thing he saw before

slamming the door behind him was Hiccup's oval face nodding silently from his frozen post.

The night was chilly as Stoick weaved through the chaos of an island at war. Half of Berk's able-bodied Vikings were already out of bed and wielding their weapons of choice. Mothers were corralling children into the safety of the Great Hall or locking their doors as they left to assist in the fight. Assessing the skies, Stoick could make out the shapes of dozens of flying pests blocking out the night stars. A few of the ferocious serpents had already started flying low to the ground, sniffing for the meat of sheep and yaks that they would often carry away. He soon felt the presence of another body running beside him.

"What's the situation, Spitelout?" Stoick grunted towards his second-in-command.

"Seems like a big crowd. Bigger than an average raid. The clouds rolling in aren't helping, but the torches should be up soon, so we can more thoroughly assess the situation. None of them have attempted landing yet. We already got a team heading over to corral what is left of the herds."

"We need more archers over the southern cliff. That's where we had the most trouble last time. Let's beat those dragons before they even have a chance to land."

Just then, the large torches perched on poles high above the rooftops were ablaze, and the sky was filled with light. Stoick and Spitelout stopped in their tracks along with most of the Vikings who were just moments ago hustling about the village searching for weapons and lost children.

In the newfound light, Stoick realized that what they had all mistaken for a thickness of clouds was actually a swarm of beasts circling the island. Deadly Nadders, Gronkles, Hideous Zipplebacks, and Monsterous Nightmares flew in a horde above their heads.

Stoick was immediately devising a plan to defend against the growing threat.

"Never mind about the south cliff." He said to Spitelout. "Get those archers on the Northern Hill. Send as many nets as you can to the lower defenses. We've got to take them out before they decide to land. And send some more back up to the barn. I'll meet up with you there."

Spitelout ran off with his new orders as the other Vikings regained composure. A Viking did not run from trouble, no matter the fearful sight they all saw in the sky.

Stoick bounded towards the forge where Gobber was furiously throwing weapons to the many empty-handed Vikings gathered by the door. Budging through the small crowd, Stoick yelled towards his friend.

"Gobber! I need all the arrows you've got. Send them up to the Northern Hill."

Face and apron covered in soot, Gobber now had a hammer attached to

his wrist as he pounded on heated metal. "Mornin! We have quite the party up there! So ye need the arrows. Right. Gonna hit them before they can hit you." Gobber left his work at the anvil, reached down towards his workbench, and cradled a large bundle of arrows in his arms. "Unfortunately, Stoick, I'm a little busy with a weapon shortage right now. Just look at this bunch." Gobber indicated towards the group of Vikings behind Stoick. "I don't see how I could bring these up the hill. I'm swamped."

"We can take it up." a higher voice spoke from behind Stoick. The two adult Vikings looked for the owner of the voice.

Pushing through the little crowd was a band of young Vikings. Their helmets askew and weapons wielded, five little Vikings stood before their chief. Astrid Hofferson, a girl with bright blonde hair and a confident attitude spoke again.

"We couldn't sleep knowing that our village was in danger." Astrid put her hands on her hips. She was about the same age as Hiccup, and Stoick recalled that she often used to play with his son when they were wee toddlers. She was leading the other Viking children, and they all looked up at their chief with exhilarating emotion in their eyes.

"Shouldn't ye all be inside?!" Gobber exclaimed.

"Well, we were thinking we could be of some use to you." Astrid spoke to her chief quite boldly for a young Viking.

"Yeah! We aren't babies anymore. We can help!" the boy standing closest behind Astrid pleaded. He was the young Snotlout, and he carried an adult-sized hammer with two stubby hands.

"Now, ye know that you children got to stay inside. It is dangerous out here, and you aren't old enough to-" Gobber was cut short by Stoick thrusting the bundle into Astrid's arms.

"Here."

The gang of children looked surprised to have so easily achieved their goal. The two twins, Ruffnut and Tuffnut, held either end of the bundle so Astrid would not drop it.

"You kids are right. Every Viking needs to be able to provide aid. Bring these arrows to the archers on the North Hill. But then go straight to the Great Hall. I want you all out of sight before any dragons start landing."

The kids gave a chorus of nods and 'Yes sir's before proudly heading up the hill carrying the cumbersome bundle.

"Stoick, what do ye think-"

"Gobber, we'll discuss it later. Just focus on these weapons. We can't have any defenseless Vikings tonight. We'll need all the help we can get."

And with that, Stoick marched off, leaving Gobber staring in awe behind him.

Stoick headed towards the lower banks as Vikings carrying sheep headed towards the barn. Unfortunately, the dragons had spotted this as well and had already started to attempt looting the sheep from the Vikings' grasps. Not about to let them take their winter food stock, Stoick and the other warriors sped into action.

Stoick gave a running head start to a jump that vaulted him-and his ax-onto the back of the nearest rampaging Gronkle. The weight of the Viking sent the Gronkle reeling off course and heading towards the fields. The Gronkle writhed and shook under the Viking chief as Stoick tried to hack at the buzzing wings of the giant. Stoick was just able to nick the dragon's left wing when he was thrown off his perch. The beast roared and soared away in retreat, just barely being able to fly off.

Falling only a few feet to the ground, Stoick rolled into the fall, and sprang right back up. He had landed in the middle of a cabbage field. From his position, he could see that the word had spread through the flock of beasts. The dragons were relentlessly attacking the sheep and those Vikings protecting them. Only so many of them had made it to the barn. Stoick ran towards the catapult that was hurling boulders towards the skies.

Stoick climbed above the village, and stood with the other Vikings atop the wooden construction. They stared at the swirling sea of reptiles above them.

"Odd, ain't it?" the Viking nearest Stoick said. "We haven't seen this many since the night of the strange Two-Wing." The Vikings gave a weary pause while loading up the catapult with a large stone. Everybody knew that was a night that Stoick the Vast did not discuss. It was the night he had lost his wife.

"Send them a message." Stoick said ending the awkward pause. There was no time for such memories now. The others cut the catapult's line, and sent a boulder straight into the fray above them. So thick was the air with dragons, that the flying weapon created a collision of three different beasts, breaking their unrecognizable flight pattern.

Soon even more dragons were among the Vikings, tearing at the catapult, blasting the smaller creatures with fire, and collecting the sheep that had not quite scampered fast enough.

But the Vikings of Berk were not about to let their hard-earned meals get swept away without a fight.

As Stoick tried to protect the catapult from being torn to pieces by the ravaging dragons trying to perch there, the Vikings below stood their ground. The villagers threw various blows at the beasts. Stoick saw a couple younger Vikings battling a ferocious Gronkle to the ground, about to cut off its wings. One maiden had come face to face with a Deadly Nadder and ran towards the creature with mace raised and war cry piercing the air. Smoke and fire filled the air. Berk was a sea of war. Dragons and Vikings battled it out for control of the food source. Every creature was ablaze with adrenaline and strength.

Stoick could see that the dragons were slowly beginning to ease up as the Vikings continued to defend their home and livelihood. He gave a

few last orders to the men at the catapult and headed back down to the ground, ramming the blunt of his ax onto the head of a Deadly Nadder on his way down. The colorful animal flew from its perch and retreated to the skies along with many of the other dragons. Stoick proudly noticed that very few of the flying swine had their claws wrapped around meaty treasure.

Heading to the barn, Stoick assisted Spitelout and the band of Vikings defending there. Some of the beasts had locked onto the sheep's hiding spot and were trying to make their way into the building. Thankfully, the dragons were now wounded and out-numbered. Stoick could see the Vikings' triumphant ending in sight.

However, that was not to be. Because as soon as this thought slipped into his consciousness, Stoick heard a high-pitched tone zipping through the air behind him, the whir getting louder and louder. The tone was somewhat familiar to him, and with quiet realization, he saw a black splotch soar across the stars towards them.

"NIGHT FURY!"

"GET DOWN!"

The villagers surrounding the barn all dropped to the ground as a blast reverberated through the air and exploded the roof of the barn behind them. Debris and dust filled the air as the Vikings tried to regain their poise. But before even Stoick could wrestle free from the wooden boards and shingles covering him, the handful of dragons that were still on the island were swarming the barn.

As the beasts picked up their prizes and flew quickly to safety, Stoick struggled to climb over the ruins towards them. He swatted at the thieves, but they were too quick. Before he could reach the depths of the barn, the dragons had all left with their wooly loot.

Stoick watched for a moment while the Vikings dusted themselves off, staring and shouting after the bandits. Just as he thought he was winning, a stupid beast thwarted him. News quickly spread through the village of the powerful blast and the creature that created it. Night furies had been absent from the skies around Berk for a long timeâ€¦

A few hours later, as the sun just began to light the sky, Stoick sauntered back to his home. Many of the other Vikings had already done the same. Those that had homes to go back to, that is. Stoick was thankful that not many dragons had been left on the island when the Night Fury attacked. The village still had a decent-sized herd. Stoick just hoped that the dragons would stay away until spring came. His village needed that food to survive the upcoming winter.

As if on cue, wisps of snow landed in the chief's braided red beard. Stoick rubbed his grimy face and dragged his ax behind him. The tired and sore man was ready for a warm fire, a cup of strong mead, and his favorite chair before another day of hard work would begin in a few hours. There was much to do after a night like this.

Stoick was just wondering if the snowstorm would last long, when he opened the door to his home and was met with a tranquil sight.

Hiccup sat on the same stair Stoick had left him. The boy had one hand on a leather-bound journal that sat on his knees and another loosely holding a charcoal pencil. His head leaned against the wall beside him, squishing the side of his freckled face as he slept.

Stoick sighed. Hiccup had tried waiting up for him. His son normally did. The action touched his heart, and he hoped Hiccup could realize that worrying was unnecessary. Stoick could protect himself, and he would do everything possible to keep his son safe. The boy worried him constantly.

Hiccup bolted upright as the sound of the closing door woke him. The boy collected his things in his arms and stood before the towering Viking in front of him. At Hiccups place on the stairs, the two were just about eye-to-eye.

"Dadâ€¦is-is everythingâ€¦" the boy stammered uneasily.

"The dragons are gone, Hiccup." Stoick reassured him with a faint smile. "You're safe."

"Oh-I-uh. I wasn't worried about me. No-uh. I only wanted to make sure you were fine and-um..."

"Right. O'Course. Just watching out for your old man, eh?" Hiccup nodded ferociously. Stoick stilled the boy's head with a little pat. "Well, then, my little dragon-slayer, why don't you head off to sleep."

With a small smile, Hiccup bounded back up the stairs. Stoick could hear the floorboards creak above him as he plopped into his chair. He thought of the other children Hiccup's age that had come to him that night. After the raid was over, he had learned that the children dutifully fulfilled his request and had found safe refuge in the Great Hall before much of the bloodshed had ensued. Astrid, whose family was plagued by the failure of her uncle, was confident and cunning. Snotlout, son of Spitelout, was strong and brave like his father. All the children gave promise of being great Vikings. Stoick saw them again in his mind's eye, eager and ready to aid their village in the chaos of the dragon attack. In a world of kill or be killed, Vikings grew up fastâ€¦

But Hiccup was nothing like the others. He was always stuck in his books and dreams. Even now, as old as the boy was, Hiccup was afraid of the night raids. Stoick always imagined that he would outgrow the fear as all Viking children did, but that still hadn't happened. Stoick could see the fear in his son's face every time the warning horn sounded. Stoick just didn't know how to change the boy. He believed he was as good a parent as his had been.

Perhaps the boy just needed a little push. Yes, that was it. A little nudge in the right direction would surely send Hiccup on the path to greatness. Stoick toyed with the thought of thrusting Hiccup a little more forcefully into his training. Yes. It was time Hiccup and his friends were given a little more responsibility in this war.

Smug at the plan he had just created, Stoick added new wood to the fire pit and lit it with a stroke of his flint. Nestling back into

his chair, and covering himself with his cloak, Stoick gazed into the fire and dreamed of the mighty chief Hiccup would one day become.

What the chief didn't know was that just above him, Hiccup tossed and turned in bed, dreaming of a far different future.

3. Chapter 3

Propping himself up on his elbows, Hiccup rubbed the sleepies from his eyes as he woke up in bed. Light from the new dawn filtered in through the window and landed on the forgotten wool socks and loose parchment that littered the floor. Hiccup rubbed his face and threw his blankets off of him. He recalled the hours before, when the dragon raid had left him shivering on the cold staircase. He had waited for his father to return safely home, huddled against the wall, with nothing to distract him from the roars of dragons and the battle cries of Vikings than the journal that now sat on his bedside table.

Hiccup couldn't think of the night too much. He had been afraid of the night attacks. He also had experienced a horrible nightmare in which he had become chief, and he hadn't known how to protect Berk. In his dream, a dragon came and devoured the entire island in one monstrous gulp. Hiccup was glad it was only in his head.

But what other things were floating around in there was another matter. Hiccup was worried about becoming chief one day. He hadn't always been. Becoming chief was just part of his life. The prospect had always come from smiling faces and hopeful eyes. It had made sense. But as Hiccup became smaller and smaller compared to his friends, and as he fell farther and farther down the line in weapons training, he had noticed that the eager faces had turned into disappointed frowns from most of the Vikings, including his father.

Now, Hiccup always knew that his father loved him. Well, at least, he thought so. There was always a kind pat on the head, a warm squeeze on the shoulder, or a gruff grunt of approval that Hiccup always interpreted as signs of love. But perhaps Hiccup was wrong. He wasn't so sure anymore if the signs were ones of affection or of pity for a boy scrawnier than any of the other children. As Hiccup grew older, the expectations placed on him seemed to grow smaller with him.

Pulling on his clothes, Hiccup wondered what the village looked like now that another raid had passed. Hiccup and the rest of the Vikings had been lulled into a false sense of security the past month or so when his father had returned from another dragon-nest finding quest. The dragons hadn't been seen since, and winter was coming fast. True, the island was usually covered in wind, rain, and sleet but winter became even more impossible and dragons seldom found Berk during those stormy months. The unexpected dragon raid at the turn of the season had left Hiccup anxious in the night.

As far as dragons went, Hiccup wasn't really afraid. It's just that being chewed through the bone by the razor-sharp teeth of a flying iguana was an experience he thought life was best lived without.

Placing his journal and pencil in his fur vest, Hiccup climbed down the stairs. The first floor of the Haddock home was littered in furs, parchment, and used dishes. Hiccup usually was in charge of cleanup, but today, Hiccup decided that he would get to his chores later. Stoick was, of course, already off on official chief duties, leaving his son to find breakfast at the Great Hall. Hiccup hopped over the last two stairs but tripped the landing, running straight into the door with a thud. Rubbing his forehead, where he had made impact with the solid block of wood, he pulled the door open with a grunt and blinked into the sunlight.

The village had clearly been shaken by last night's events. Large scorch marks scarred the earth, and the Viking houses were in various states of disfigurement. An array of helmets, weapons, and dragon bits were haphazardly strewn across the ground. Down at the barn, Stoick was already overseeing the reconstruction of the mangled building. However, despite the evidence of chaos, Hiccup thought it actually looked eerily beautiful, for a thin layer of gleaming snow sat atop the demolition of the village.

When Hiccup entered through the open doors of the Great Hall, those still working through breakfast were sharing new stories of heroic greatness from the previous night. Hiccup grabbed a bowl of cold porridge and sat at the empty end of a table. He liked to just listen to the stories and eat in peace. Although, he did miss the days when he and Fishlegs would discuss dragon stats over piles of charred fish and moldy bread. The two had been inseparable for a time. However, the other boy had grown large enough to gain the acceptance of the other children. Fishlegs thus left Hiccup for the prospects of extended social approval. Hiccup didn't really blame him. Hiccup had quite a list of things he would do to be a part of their gang. He imagined how it would be: not getting chosen last for games, not getting teased for his lack of physical prowess, and not getting pushed around. However, he was sure he'd never know for sure. Hiccup could barely remember a time when Snotlout wasn't picking on him. Hiccup had sort of grown up with him, as a dragon had taken Hiccup's mother when he was just a baby. Before Hiccup could look after himself, he would spend his time at the Jorgensons being roughhoused by Snotlout and carelessly neglected by his mother. The other kids didn't seem that bad, but they always followed Snotlout's lead.

Speaking of the gang, Hiccup thankfully noted that they weren't in the Great Hall. If they were, the other kids would no doubt throw various jabs at him for his lack of bravery last night. The other kids had gotten into a habit of escaping into the fray when the dragons came around. They never actually got close to any of them. But even just leaving the shelter of their homes provides them with a good story to tell. If there was one thing Vikings loved more than a good dragon slaughter was a good _story _of a dragon slaughter.

Hiccup listened to the various gossip of the day as he picked at his moldy breakfast. Apparently a Night Fury had made an appearance. Well, _appearance _wouldn't be the right way of describing it. Viking eyes had never truly seen a Night Fury. They would never fly close enough to the island to be seen but stay hidden in the dark of the night. The "unholy offspring of lightning and death itself" they would say. What Hiccup heard was that a creature of the sort had

blasted the barn to shreds last night. Hiccup recalled the carnage he had seen earlier that morning. Night Furies were really as impressively lethal as the stories spoke of. He wondered how, after so many years, a Night Fury found its way back to Berk. Hiccup wasn't even born yet when the Night Furies suddenly disappeared from the night raids.

Just as Hiccup was getting lost in visions of dark and mysterious dragons blasting the island to bits, an older Viking with a scruffy brown beard and a scar across his cheek recalled his version of the night's events.

"Aye! I was just over at the forge ta get me ole ax sharpened, and those kids showed up!"

Hiccup paused mid-bite and swallowed hard. And not because his porridge was thicker than a Viking's beard. The gang hadn't actually participated, had they? Pushing his bowl of goop aside, Hiccup focused all of his attention on the man with the cheek scar.

"They was lookin ta help. I thought we'd have an angry chief, but Stoick just threw a bunch o arrows in their arms and sent 'em off. A little anxious they was scamperin up that hill." The Viking stopped and glanced over at Hiccup. Hiccup pretended not to notice, becoming suddenly very interested in a carving in the wooden table. The storyteller continued in a lower voice. "Mind ye, not all of the kids were there. Wonder wha' Stoick's sayin to himself right now-"

Hiccup couldn't listen to any more. He stood up and put away his half-eaten bowl. His stomach rolled over as he left the Great Hall and started shuffling through the village, but his sickness wasn't caused by the putrid porridge.

The gang had actually done something notable. They had gone directly to his father. And worse, he had given them something to do! And where was Hiccup?

Hiccup folded his arms and kept walking.

He could only think about the way he had huddled up indoors instead of going out to help like the others. His father hadn't even mentioned anything when he came home last night. Hiccup wondered if Stoick was disappointed in him. But no. He had never said that he was disappointed.

He had never said he was proud either.

Hiccup aimlessly headed towards the kill ring. Even after a night like this, he was sure the teens were in training with Gobber. Vikings wouldn't let a little thing like fire keep them from their daily rituals. Hiccup did not enjoy watching the dragons attack the older kids, but he did learn a bit by watching. Maybe some of their skills would just rub onto him if he was there. Or maybe if he watched the teens face the dragons, he could.

As he neared the ring, Hiccup heard the doubled roars of a newly caught Hideous Zippleback ahead of him. He blinked and slowly forced himself towards the monster. Then he heard something even more frightening from behind.

"Well look who _finally_ came out of his hiding spot!"

Oh no.

"Thinking about meeting your end? I'm sure that monster would _love_ a nice snack."

Hiccup felt a rough hand grab his arm, and he was suddenly staring into the triumphant face of Snotlout.

"Didn't think you'd _ever_ want to see the dragons the way you hole up in your house every time the warning horn sounds. Afraid of the dragons in the dark?" Snotlout continued, "How about we see how you get along in broad daylight?"

The gang behind him laughed. Astrid, Fishlegs, Ruffnut, and Tuffnut were following behind Snotlout.

"I'd probably do better than _you_ would fare. The poor beast would have to see your face." Hiccup mumbled, staring at the snowy ground at his feet.

No one but Snotlout seemed to notice that Hiccup said anything. Snotlout shook Hiccup with aggression then released him.

"Listen, kid. We helped save the village from a _Night Fury_ while you were camped up at home."

Ruffnut and Tuffnut, engrossed with the abuse, chimed in.

"Some chief _your_ gonna be!"

"Stoick should banish you!"

Hiccup tried to ignore their bashes and head towards home, but Snotlout clasped a thick fist onto the folds of his outer layer. With the sudden force, Hiccup slid out of his vest, tripped, and landed on the ground. Sitting on his knees, he looked up at the gang. Fishlegs seemed uncomfortable, as he normally did when they were teasing Hiccup. Astrid was gripping her ax with white knuckles. Arms crossed, the twins sneered down at Hiccup. Snotlout burst into laughter, waving Hiccup's vest in the air.

"Ha! Can't even _walk_ properly!" Hiccup stood and tried to grab at his vest. His journal was in there, and he didn't want the rude boy to ruin another thing of his. The boy's ranting was doing quite a number on his pride already.

"We were so vital in the attack last night that the chief wants us to help _again_!" The dark-haired boy screeched.

"Wait." Hiccup paused mid-reach. "What?"

"Yeah, we did such a great job during the raid that you are looking at the new fire brigade."

Hiccup did look at the other kids. They were going to be involved? They were going to get to earn their heroics every raid? Some of them weren't even ten yet. Did his father really think that highly of

them? If so, what did he think of Hiccup?

Snotlout continued with a smile. "Yup. Stoick just had a little chat with us. We'll be on our way to saving the day again!" Snotlout ended his gloat by tossing the vest over Hiccup's head.

Hiccup couldn't quite believe it. Hiccup was already beginning to be closed off from the other kids anyway. But by putting them all in a job together, Hiccup felt more than left out. He felt purposefully abandoned by his father. Didn't he see that Hiccup was falling away from his friends? And separating them just gave them one more reason to think they were better than him. Hiccup pulled his vest back on in a huff. As he walked away, downcast, Snotlout yelled one more spiteful remark back at him as the gang headed towards the kill ring;

"You weren't invited to the brigade! Even your _father_ knows you're USELESS!"

Hiccup broke into a run. This was the last straw. Snotlout was right. Hiccup couldn't do anything. He always failed in weapon training. He couldn't face a dragon, and now he couldn't even help with the raids.

Running into the forest, pushing away branches and bugs, Hiccup's thoughts flew to his father. He hated to listen so strongly to Snotlout, but he was just voicing the opinions everybody seemed to be having lately. Hiccup recalled the whispers in the Great Hall that morning. "not _all _the kids were thereâ€|" Hiccup had humiliated his father just by failing to show up last night. Everyone must think of him as a failure. Even Hiccup believed it, so his father must believe it too.

When his frustration and tears were spent, Hiccup sat on a large boulder and looked around him. The forest was quiet as many of the creatures had found refuge from the on-coming winter. The snow lightly covered the pines and birch trees. The air was still, but the sky was a light gray.

Hiccup pulled out his notebook. He drew the trees as they reached the graying sky, the little frozen creek that reflected the straining light, and the one lonesome rabbit that was heading off into its winter hibernation. Without realizing it, Hiccup had spent most of the day out on this rock. Another light snow started to fall from the sky.

Hiccup realized he liked the woods as he brushed a few flakes of snow off of his current page. He had never gone this far away from the village before, but it was peaceful. He was alone, and he could think for himself. He thought of what Snotlout and the Viking with the scar had said. He thought about how his father had treated him last night. And he thought of the new job the gang had earned.

"If dad needs a sign that I'm brave, I've got to do something." Hiccup spoke aloud. He had made up his mind. He was going to get everyone to believe he wasn't useless. He didn't want to be treated like a child. He wanted to make his father proud.

Hiccup shivered.

A strong wind suddenly was rustling around him, scrapping his cheeks and causing the pages of his journal to flap rapidly. Hiccup gazed skyward. The gray sky had suddenly become black. A snowstorm was not expected this early into the season, but Hiccup had seen enough of them to know that this wasn't good. Storing his journal in his vest, Hiccup jumped from the boulder and headed back towards the village.

But where _was_ the village.

Hiccup frantically turned in a circle. The path of his boots in the snow had been covered by the last couple hours of falling flurries, so he couldn't be sure where he should head. The sky was so dark, that he couldn't get a clear reading of the sun. The snow blew into his eyes as he tried to think logically. He didn't know where to go. He didn't know how long he had before frostbite would take him. He didn't know what to do.

The snow was coming down so thick, that he couldn't see very far in front of him. Would it even matter if he was gone? Would anyone even miss him? Deflated, he was about to just sit down in the snow when he thought, "My father wouldn't sit down to freeze. So neither will I."

Hiccup looked around. The trees were just dark shadows behind the curtain of heavy snow around him. Folding his hands underneath his armpits, he chose a direction at random and took a step forward. Then another.

Head down, he pushed against the wind and snow. At times, the trees would block a good portion of the weather boring down on him. But even so, his hair soon froze solid, and he couldn't feel his cheeks. Step by step, Hiccup headed towards-he didn't know where-as the snow piled higher and higher around him. Soon he was trudging through snow that came up past his knees. Trudging through drifts was not an uncommon activity for a Viking to experience on Berk, but usually Vikings hadn't already been in a storm for some time as Hiccup had. He could barely lift one foot in front of the other.

After one particularly difficult tug of his leg, he couldn't get his foot free. The snow was too deep and frozen around him. Hiccup realized he hadn't eaten anything sense the moldy porridge that morning. What he wouldn't give for some of that horrible cooking now. Pulling with all the energy he had left, Hiccup yanked his foot out of the snow bank and right out of his boot! Wobbling precariously on his right foot, the other flying through the air as he tried to regain balance, Hiccup gave a shriek. Unable to keep balanced, he fell to the ground and lay jumbled in the snow.

Hiccup stared at the whiteness all around him. He tried to wriggle some feeling back into his appendages. But he couldn't. He tried to summon the will to get back up. But he couldn't. He tried to heave the frigid air in his lungs into a yell for help. But he couldn't. He really was useless.

A real Viking would be able to get up.

A real Viking would not feel like he couldn't go on any longer.

A real Viking would not have gotten lost in the woods in the first

place.

Hiccup closed his eyes, letting the snow cover his eyelids.

Hiccup felt only the increased heaviness on his chest as the snow accumulated there. Covered in ice, he could no longer hear the whistle of air winding past his ear.

It's odd the things you _actually_ _think_ when you're facing the end. Most imagine that past memories will flood through you in waves, finally showing some mysterious magic thread that connects every event of your life, freeing you from your failed sense of purpose. Or perhaps they think death comes with a friendly cooing from the face of someone you love. And some would say that your final moments are filled with darkness and the lost hope of changing some past decision.

But that's not what Hiccup felt.

Through a mass of ice and snow, Hiccup felt a heat radiate from his chest.

4. Chapter 4

Stoick sighed as he shut the door behind him. He had gotten few precious hours of contented sleep before his duties sent him off of his chair and out into the cold. He did have a bed upstairs next to Hiccup's room, but for some reason he always just stayed in his chair. There was often little food inside the Haddock house, but Stoick nibbled on some of yesterday's bread. Chewing slowly, he knew that Hiccup would eat in the Great Hall. Since the dragon took Valka, the two men of the house rarely saw a home-cooked meal. Not that the food had been all that great before the attack of the Four-Wing anyway. Stoick almost smiled as he remembered his wife's awful cooking. He wondered if there was time to set out for another dragon hunt before winter set in. Almost in response to his questioning, a burst of morning wind caught Stoick off-guard.

Outside, the sun had come up and caused light to dance on the white snow crystals. Heading towards the barn, Stoick noticed that the frost and snow had already taken over. It wasn't unlike the conditions of ten years past when he had watched the love of his life disappear into the dark clouds. He would never forget the sight. Or the promises he had made that night. Stoick would find Valka, and in the mean time, he would protect her son.

After even a couple years, these vows had proved difficult. Stoick's first dragon hunt had been a complete disaster. They had left two days after Valka's abduction. The snow and ice and already began to settle, and they had barely made it a few leagues into the misty and mysterious Dragon Seas when a mass of flying beasts had set aflame two boats of his fleet. Since then, Stoick always brought bigger and bigger fleets. And although the excursions always proved dangerous, they almost always got farther and farther each time. Patience, Stoick believed, would be the key to this victory. Not only for his beloved Valka but for the future safety and security of his village.

The other promise, however, somehow seemed even less hopeful. Hiccup

had always been a bit on the meager side. And the boy's early arrival into this world had provided him with more than a few dangers. From falling rocks, swift currents, and even common colds, Hiccup was prone to attracting an endless and diverse assortment of life threatening ailments. These things were all just side-effects of being small. However, Stoick believed that Hiccup would be the strongest of them all. And already, Hiccup was proving himself in that way. Because no matter how many bones the boy broke, seeds he choked on, or trees he fell out of, Hiccup always healed and always got right back up. Stoick was proud of him for that. If only the boy could prevent those situations from happening as well as he could recover from the consequences of them.

The one danger that Hiccup was always good at avoiding was the most lethal on the island: the species called "dragon". Hiccup never left the house during the raids. Even when he was a much younger tot and was told to head to the Great Hall with the others, Hiccup would always refuse to leave his room. It had always been a hassle when the young one sat shivering under the covers while fire raged around the village. Stoick was never fully comfortable leaving the boy alone, but to keep him safe, the island needed its chief during battle. So Stoick had always left his son to save him. And Hiccup always remained silent and scared until the chief returned to comfort him.

Stoick brushed the crumbs off his beard as he finished his breakfast. He was going to teach Hiccup how to face the beasts. He would someday be chief, and if he was to be the protector of Berk, he needed to learn how to protect himself. And Stoick new just how to get the lad started. Last night, as the other youngsters bravely succeeded in helping in the raid as fire blazed all around, Stoick was inspired. He was going to re-instigate the fire brigade.

In past years, the fire brigade slowly disappeared as more and more Vikings were needed with weapons in hand. No one really noticed or cared, though. Houses burned all the time, and the fire brigade usually couldn't do too much with the large quantity of fire-breathing creatures aiming at the village. But Stoick didn't need to save houses. He needed to teach the future leaders of Berk. Including his son.

"Morning, Stoick!" Spitelout called out from the burnt wreckage as Stoick neared the barn. "Just got here myself."

"How's it looking, Spitlout?" the chief asked.

"Not too good. Looks like the fire got through to the floor. The walls are unstable. Even the foundation is going to need a renovation."

"Well, let's not waste any time. Winter's coming, and the animals will need shelter. Where are the sheep now?"

"I just sent them up to Mildew's place. Most of the fences down here got torn apart, and at least there is some coverage from the wind up against those cliffs."

"Great. That'll do for now until we get this cleaned up. We'll need to clear away the wreckage for fire wood, and bring in some new stuff from the stores. From our last inventory, we should have enough. I

just hope we don't have too many other repairs needed. How many sheep made it through the night?"

"We still have about two-thirds of the herd."

Stoick sighed, "Well, I'll send anyone who isn't rebuilding their own homes this way."

Spitlout nodded and got back to rummaging through the cracked boards. Stoick started heading towards the lumber storage but decided to make a quick stop at the Forge first. Passing through town, Stoick was stopped occasionally by cheery morning greetings from the village's inhabitants. One of the things Stoick was most proud of in Viking folk was their adaptability and unhindered optimism. Even as they re-roofed their homes for the eighth time this year and nibbled on leftover chicken bones, the people of Berk wore their helmets and smiles proudly.

Stomping through the village, Stoick counted only three other buildings in need of great repair. "That should leave a little extra building wood for the winter. As long as there are no more raids until spring." Stoick thought.

The chief was also stopped by the village cook (Aptly nicknamed "Cook") who prepared meals in the Great Hall for those who (like him and his son) took advantage of the communal nature of the village's basic supplies.

"There just isn't enough grain in the storehouses for this." the stout woman argued. "With the harvest being how it was and the rations being how they is, I've got more 'n more complaints 'bout empty stomachs."

"We'll just have to provide smaller portions in the Great Hall this winter. Sorry, Cook. I'm doing all I can. How about I see if one more hunt is in order before the end of the season?"

Cook huffed, but eventually satisfied, she turned on her heel and waddled back to the Great Hall to clean up the remains of breakfast.

Stoick felt heavier and heavier the longer he remained in the village. The life of a chief was not always the easiest. He had so many lives in his hands, and those lives trusted him. Even after all these years, he wished he could trust himself just as much.

Above him, the sky reflected the white brilliance of the snow below, and Stoick suspected more to fall before the day's end. His attention turned to the Forge that lay just ahead. Through the open shutter window, he could see the orange glow of a fire and could hear the clear _clang _of metal on metal as it coincided with the rhythm of a thick voice.

"OOOOHHHHH! I've got my axe,

And I've got my mace,"

Stoick gave the door a sharp rap of his knuckles.

"And I've got my wife

With the ugly face."

Stoick's fist pounded the door a little harder.

"I'M A VIKING THROUGH AND-"

"Gobber!"

Stoick stood in the now open doorway, hands on his hips as he watched his best friend stop mid-swing above a misshapen axe.

"Why, Stoick! Nice ta see ya this mornin'!" Gobber gave the axe a few more pounds and dumped it in a barrel of water. Wiping his left hand on his dirty apron, he limped closer to the chief. "Thought ya would be down by the barn. Them lizards sure aren't given up early this year."

Stoick gave a hearty chuckle. "And I thought _you _would be down by the Ring. Don't you have students to attend to?"

"Nawwwâ€¦!" Gobber shook his head as he hung his apron on a nearby peg and started twisting off his hammer appendage. "A Zippleback was caught last night. Gonna give it a few more hours to run outta juice, then we'll start a lovely lesson on double blind-spots." Attaching a long metal hook onto his right stump, Gobber continued a little quieter, "Stoick, wha' were ya doing last night? You near 'bout killed those kids, sendin' them out in the fray like tha'."

Stoick relaxed his arms a little, "That's kind of why I wanted to talk to you." Stoick often came to his friend to talk freely and to gain a different perspective on some of his more difficult decisions. "These kids have to grow up sooner rather than later." Stoick began pulling at the ends of his braided beard. "These dragons are becoming harder and harder to get rid of. They are hunting later and later into the winter season. If we don't provide some experience to those kids, they won't fully understand the war we're in." Stoick crossed his arms, "I think they are ready for the fire brigade."

"They are barely ten years old!" Gobber argued.

"They are strong and eager to earn their place."

"That may be, Stoick, but just because they think they're ready, doesn't mean tha' they are." Gobber sighed.

"If we waited until _you _thought they were ready, they'd still be hiding in the Hall when they are our age."

"Oh, laugh all ya want. I'm just worried about 'em." Gobber sighed and continued, "But perhaps with a little training we will have some mighty fine water bucket carriers by next spring."

Stoick gratefully clasped the shoulder of his friend and shared a smile. Suddenly Gobber's face shifted into one of worry.

"What about Hiccup."

Gobber expected a frown to form on Stoick's face or for a silence to create a border between them, but Gobber was taken aback when the

chief replied quickly and without hesitation.

"He's going to lead it."

—

Stoick watched as Gobber headed down to start his lessons. Stoick had predicted that his best friend would be hesitant about letting the kids-especially Hiccup- into such a danger-ridden environment. Gobber had a right to worry. The raids weren't safe even for a full-grown Viking, but it was just an occupational hazard. And this opportunity would surely give Hiccup and the other children the push they needed to grow into the Vikings they were supposed to be. After that argument, and the thought of a whole winter to train the kids, Gobber had thankfully let the matter be. Gobber was a good friend and confidant.

Finally heading to the get lumber, Stoick sent a few Vikings towards the barn to help Spitelout, and then he ran into the five Vikings he had really been looking for. Snotlout, Astrid, Ruffnut, Tuffnut, and Fishlegs were all grouped together heading towards the kill ring. Watching the older children battle the caught beasts was a favorite sport among most Viking younglings. Stoick remembered the days when he clung to the wired edge of the ring, yearning for his chance at glory.

Stoick stepped in front of the bunch and stopped them with a wave of his hand. Stoick hadn't gained permission from their parents yet, but he was confident they would all agree. No Viking would shy away from a chance at proving themselves. Especially when their chief personally offered the chance.

"Snotlout, Astrid, Ruffnut, Tuffnut, Fishlegs." Stoick gave them each a nod as he greeted them.

"Morning chief."

"Sir"

"Mr. Haddock"

"Mornin' "

"Chief Stoick."

Stoick beamed at the small crowd in front of him. "I am extremely pleased with your work from last night. You all have proved to be level-headed and obedient during a raid. I'd like to offer you all the chance at yet more dragon experience."

At that, the kids began to chatter with excited faces.

"Settled down, settle down." Stoick waited until all eyes were focused on him before continuing. "This doesn't involve interfering with dragons directly, so don't get over excited. I have decided that Berk is in need of a new fire brigade after what has happened to the barn. I want all five of you to begin fire brigade duties next spring."

The chatter at once started up again with praise and thanks. Stoick

calmed them with a wave of his hand.

"Your parents will be notified of this offer by the end of the day, and I expect you will all have a good discussion with them about the dangers associated with this job. But I do believe, with a little training, that you will all be ready by the first raid of the spring. Now run along, and don't get to far off. Looks like more snow is heading our way."

Trying (and mostly failing) at keeping calm, dignified, Viking faces, the kids stumbled off towards the kill ring. Stoick was proud to see them so enthusiastic and hoped that Hiccup would feel the same way. Whether he did or not, however, Stoick was going to do all he can to turn his boy into a true Viking.

"Stoick! Stoick!"

The chief turned to see Spitelout jogging after him. He was sweaty from the morning's work and he wore a frown. It was unusual for Spitelout to be so careless of his appearances. Stoick stopped to face the other Viking as he came to a halt in front of him.

"What's the matter, Spitelout."

"You're needed at the docks. Trader Johan just came in. He says he's got a message for you."

"Trader Johan was just here a few weeks ago. He wasn't due back until spring."

Spitelout replied with a curt nod. He knew this too. Trader Johan's appearance was not just untimely, but daunting. The trader traveled across the northern Viking islands with goods and gossip. Both of which could only be obtained at a cost. A change in schedule such as this was unheard of with Johan. His trading goods often contained a few surprises but the time of his arrival did not.

Worried, but refusing to show it, Stoick led Spitelout down to the docks. Right away, Stoick knew something was amiss. Johan's vessel sat heavy in the water, covered with ice. The sail was stuck in a solidly folded position thanks to layers of frost. Icicles two feet long hung from the metal rigging, and Johan himself was as blue as the sea.

Already, many of the Vikings of Berk were surrounding Johan, who quickly and readily took advantage of the crowd. He began a climactic and winded story that was met with many sounds of astonishment from the Vikings.

"I was already two days out to sea after meeting with the Berserkers and a tower of snow and sleet came after me! I could see nothing but white and blue far as the eye could see! I knew Berk was the closest land for leagues around, and I wouldn't be able to out run the storm. Then my sails and riggin' started freezing up around me. My toes and fingers came next. All black and blue they are. But just when I thought all was lost, I came sailing out of the mist! I had powered in front of the storm, and got to safety with all of you! OW! MY TOES! THEY'RE ABOUT TO FALL OFF! Please, someone help my poor frozen piggies!"

Trader Johan collapsed on the dock in a dramatic fashion. He wore torn and threading clothes, and his brown hair was frozen. Icicles were dripping from his extremely large nose.

Stoick marched up to the man, as he was picked up between two burly Vikings. Johan flickered his eyes towards the chief and begged, "Please, will you let me stay. I know I'd be a heavy burden for you to bear, but I am willing to pay. Winter is quickly upon us."

"How far away is that storm?" Stoick demanded.

"Just about three hours. It's comin' fast though. Maybe two." Johan shivered under the gaze of the chief.

Stoick replied, "Johan, you are free to stay as long as you abide by the rules and customs of Berk as well as provide any and all food you have to our communal stores. Take him to the Great Hall and find him something warm to eat."

"Thank you, thank you, Stoick." Johan muttered as the two Vikings carried him up the ramps.

Stoick directed towards a few other Vikings chattering about what the traveling man spoke of. "Start unloading the goods out of Johan's boat and into the Great Hall. Then get his vessel pulled out of the water if there's time. I want everyone in the Great Hall within two hours."

The Vikings quickly got to work, and Stoick turned to Spitelout. "Sound the warning. I want three day's worth of rations along with all of Berk in the Great Hall immediately."

Stoick gazed at the sky. It seemed bleak and empty. The sky was taunting him with a fake calmness that made his bones ache.

"What about the animals?" Spitelout asked. The barn was currently out of commission.

"Bring as many as you can into the Great Hall." Stoick knew that yaks and sheep had a better chance in the cold, but he didn't want to take any risks with winter coming fast. It would not be the most comfortable, but at least they'd have the promise of future food.

Spitelout ran off again, and Stoick sauntered towards the other docks. There were just a few boats that hadn't been brought out of the water. Leading some more men, he helped haul the rest of the fleet out and set them above the quickly freezing waves.

As flurries slowly drifted from the sky, the warning horn sounded. But with the wind picking up quickly, it was difficult to hear even from Stoick's position at the docks. Herding the other Vikings towards the Great Hall, he headed up the cliff.

Near the village, Stoick saw Cook struggling through the crowd with bags of flour in her arms. Stoick cut straight towards her and took one bag under each arm.

"Let me, Cook."

"Thanks, Stoick." Cook said gratefully as she held the last bag.

The sky had quickly blackened as the sunlight failed to hit the ground below. The snow was falling thick and fast. A gust of wind nearly knocked the Viking chief off his feet as he entered the Great Hall. The fire was blazing, shedding orange light on the Vikings huddled there. Directly to the right of the door, a small herd of animals was being corralled using benches and tables. Stoick dropped the bags of flour by the small kitchen area, and headed back toward the door.

Berk was already covered with a thick layer of white. He could barely see a few yards ahead of him as he directed Vikings into the shelter. Soon Gobber neared the door, ushering his students and the younger children into the Hall. As Snotlout gave a lung shattering sneeze, Stoick grasped onto Gobber's lumpy upper arm. Quickly glancing around the room, Stoick came to a conclusion he was most dreading. He whipped his head to meet Gobber's wide eyes.

"Have you seen Hiccup?" the chief's raspy voice clenched. Gobber gave a worried look that answered Stoick's question. Bounding over to Spitelout, Stoick muttered quickly, "We're going to get Hiccup. We should be back within the hour. Probably."

With Gobber just behind, Stoick was pulling at the large door when a small pat on the leg stopped him. He looked down to see a round blond head accompanied by a round, fur covered body. Fishlegs looked nervously up at his chief.

"Chiefâ€|uhâ€|sirâ€|I-I-"

"Come on. Out with it, Fishlegs." Gobber urged.

"I think I saw Hiccup run into the woods this morning." Fishlegs spoke fast and then looked down at his boots.

Stoick gave a grunt and bursted through the door, Gobber followed but not after giving Fishlegs a pat on the head.

Stoick bounded ahead and could hear the heavy breathing of his friend close behind him. Cutting through the snow, Stoick headed up the hill and the forest. The wind blasted heavy flurries at his face and eyes. He could barely breathe as the cold air raced down his throat.

He heard a faint thud from behind him. He spared a glance as Gobber was getting up and rubbing his knee above his peg leg.

"Stoick!" Gobber called.

"It's alright!" he replied. "Get back to the Hall!" Gobber's set brow and painful stare disappeared quickly as Stoick took a few more steps towards the tree line.

The forest proved only slightly less difficult to navigate. The snow was caught in large drifts that were difficult to plow through, and an occasional tree branch fell under the weight and strain of the heavy winds and snow.

How could he have let Hiccup out here? What was the boy thinking? Hiccup was often on his own during the day. That was just the nature

of things. And yes, Hiccup's curiosity often got him lost or worse, but Stoick thought that by now the boy would have a better head on his shoulders.

But even through all of his irritated thoughts, Stoick was slowly being swallowed by guilt and worry. He had vowed to keep Hiccup safe. From that night when the then infant was wrapped safely in his cloak. To honor Valka, to promote his own line, to calm the love in his heart, Stoick would always be there to keep Hiccup safe.

But where was he now?

Stoick's thoughts whirled and twisted through his mind as evilly as the snow shifted through the air.

How long had Stoick been searching?

How long had Hiccup been lost?

Stoick tried to find some Viking optimism deep in his soul, but found nothing but a hallow, taunting grave.

"HICCUP!" Stoick yelled with fear and desperation. "Pleaseâ€|" Stoick fell to his knees. Tears rolling down his face, he prayed to the gods. "Help me find my son."

After a minute that seemed like sixty, Stoick stood up and trudged on. The tears were now frozen on his cheeks, but he had a dedicated heart.

Stoick heard a muddled shriek coming from just ahead.

Hiccup.

Stoick ran towards the sound. Pushing away branches, and lunging over snow banks, Stoick pushed on. But there were no more sounds. Nothing more to lead him. Stoick wasn't sure of the direction anymore. Had he imagined the sound?

But Stoick's eyes found small tracks in the snow. They were just about Hiccup's size, but they were disappearing quickly under the newly falling snow. Stoick's heart fluttered as he hurried to catch the fading signs.

He followed for only a few more yards when he came across the end of the prints and a large mound of snow.

Stoick rushed towards the heap and brushed some of the snow away. Green fabric popped out against the whiteness all around.

Hiccup.

Stoick laid on hand on the boy's chest, and, feeling a flicker of a heart beat, he used his other hand to wipe the snow of the rest of his son.

Stoick couldn't contain his smile. He couldn't breathe-but not because of the wind.

Hiccup was alive.

But just barely. The boy's face was drained of color. His thin fingers were turning as blue as his lips, and he was missing a boot.

"Oh, Hiccup." Stoick sighed as he heaved the boy out of the wet snow. Stoick shuddered as his warm hands touched the boy's icy skin. He didn't even want to think about how that snow drift had almost become the boy's grave.

Stoick wrapped his cloak tighter around his son, just like he had done ten years ago. Hiccup was in his care. He would keep their son safe. With renewed strength, Stoick fought against the elements towards the Great Hall. Holding the limp body against his chest, he heaved a few heavy words into the air.

"I've got my sights set on a promise."

5. Chapter 5

Hiccup could smell the musty, livestock-filled room before he could see it. Opening his eyelids seemed to be too much of a struggle, but he could tell he was in the Great Hall thanks to the powerful stench of Viking-sweat and Cook's infamous morning porridge. With a few tired blinks, his eyes reluctantly started taking in his surroundings. As suspected, the Hall was crowded with Vikings. Some were laying on tables and benches, others conversed loudly in groups by the large fireplace, and still others weaved through the maze of activity passing out breakfast. Vikings certainly were a lively bunch, but at this specific moment in time, Hiccup wished they would all quiet up a bit. Hiccup seemed to have quite the headache and the recent out break of drinking songs was not helping.

Closing his eyes to the room, Hiccup felt a scratchy wet touch on his cheek. Peering with one eye, he saw a sheep near his cot, tongue out searching for another opportunity to lick him. 'No sleeping now,' Hiccup thought as he sat up and kneaded his temples, hoping the pounding would somehow subside. He couldn't think straight. Why was everyone in the Great Hall? Why were the animals in here too? How did he end up on this cot?

Then it all came back to him.

The storm, the ice, the snow, the warm touch on his chest that pulled him out of the dark. Hiccup pulled his knees up to his chin and stared at the sheep still blankly standing next to him.

Hiccup had failed. He was no Viking. He was useless.

He spun around and searched the crowd with his eyes. Finally he spotted the large cloak and red beard that could only be his father. He had saved him. Again.

It seemed that whenever Hiccup was in trouble, his father was there to clean up the mess. It happened a lot. He loved his father, but it was starting to get bothersome. When was he going to be able to do things right for once?

Hiccup set his forehead on his knees and let a tear fall down his face. How would his father ever be proud of him now?

"Hiccup?"

The boy in question frantically wiped his face and looked up. Fishlegs was standing there with a wooden bowl in his hands. He looked worried and handed Hiccup the bowl, the contents steaming with a warmth that Hiccup thought his fingers would never feel again. When Hiccup had taken the bowl of porridge, Fishlegs rung his hands nervously and let his eyes dart around the crowd. Hiccup could only guess that he was watching for the other kids. If they saw him with Hiccup the Useless, he could get socially demoted.

"Listen, er...Stoick just wanted me to give that to you when you woke up. Andâ€¦I'm glad you're okay." Fishlegs said quickly.

"Thank you, Fishlegs." Hiccup replied, trying to dislodge his spoon from his thick breakfast.

"Andâ€¦I-I'm sorry things have been going so poorly for you." Fishlegs waited to make eye contact with Hiccup before he continued. "I wish we could still be friends."

Hiccup sighed. Fishlegs had very clearly been the one to break their friendship in the first place. But Hiccup did enjoy his company and didn't want anyone else to feel hurt.

"Of course we're friends. We'll always be." Hiccup assured him.

Fishlegs replied with a huge smile, and having made sure the area was clear of the Gang, he hopped himself up next to Hiccup.

"So what happened?" Hiccup asked.

"To you or to the village?" Fishlegs replied.

"Both." Hiccup continued to eat the warming food as Fishlegs explained. Somehow, though, he still felt cold and icy.

"Well, Trader Johan appeared out of nowhere, and he said he had outrun this huge storm. The Chief demanded that every Viking and livestock animal be brought to the Great Hall. So everyone came in, but you were nowhere to be found. That's when Stoick went off to search for you. Snotlout was making horrid jokes about neither of you coming back, but I was so worried. Thankfully, Astrid stopped that treasonous behavior with a good blow-ha! You should have seen the look on his face! Well-er-anyways, after hours and hours Stoick finally came bursting through the door with you in his arms. You were all blue and your left foot was almost black. Gothi gave you some special drink, and you were set over by the fire. Gobber kept messaging your toes. He thought you might loose some. Then you finally looked somewhat normal again, and your dad finally calmed down enough to warm _himself _up."

In the break of his story, Hiccup stared. He might not have made it. But his dad had obviously been really worried. Hiccup couldn't decide if he was embarrassed that he had been in such a state with the whole

of the village tending to him, or if he was pleased that his father cared. Fishlegs then continued.

"Right now, Stoick is working on getting a team outside. But the snow has drifted so high against the door that we can't get out. I think they're going to try to dig through. I mean, the snow didn't stop for _days._"

At that, Hiccup almost spit out his porridge.

"Days?!" Hiccup almost shook Fishlegs.

"Err, well, yeah. It has been about four days since the storm started. The snow only started to lighten up last night."

"I've been asleep for _four days_?"

"Well, not the whole time. Sometimes you would open your eyes and then Gothi would give you more of that elixir."

"I definitely don't remember that." Hiccup groaned. "How ridiculous I must look to everyone! The boy who can't even go into the woods without ending up unconscious for the better part of a week!"

"I was actually kind of wondering about that."

Hiccup gave Fishlegs a dark glare.

"No! I mean, about what happened in the woods." Fishlegs quickly seemed very interested in the state of his fingernails and would not look at Hiccup directly.

"I justâ€¦I wasn't a Viking."

Hiccup left Fishlegs to ponder his response as he got up and headed towards the kitchen. However, his dramatic exit didn't last long because he suddenly felt light headed and crashed to the floor. Fishlegs hurried up beside him and pulled him up. Fishlegs held him steady as the surrounding Vikings came up to Hiccup. Stoick was suddenly among them and pulled his son back to the cot.

Hiccup looked up at his father, trying to ignore the crowd surrounding them. Hiccup was not expecting the seriousness in his father's eyes or the set frown hidden beneath his beard. Hiccup searched for any sign of a comforting smile, a gentle pat, anything that would calm his frantic mind. But it was not so. Stoick merely set Hiccup on the cot with a forceful arm.

"Gothi says you need to rest." Stoick gruffly stated.

Without another word, he turned away from Hiccup and called out to a few of the others. The older Vikings head towards the door, wrenched it open with some difficulty, and started digging through the wall of snow that contained them.

Hiccup felt even colder than he had before the porridge. To be so simply dismissed by his father felt like an icy dagger to his heart. Hiccup needed to do something to prove he was a Viking, to get his father to see he was not useless.

"Ha! Hiccup can't even stand up properly."

The familiar whiny voice was all too familiar to Hiccup and not what he wanted right now.

"How's the baby doing, Fishlegs?" Snotlout asked defiantly.

Hiccup lay down, covering himself with his sheets, and turned away from the new onlookers.

"How is this fishbone ever going to help lead the fight against dragons? He can hardly sit up!" Snotlout relished in a chorus of chuckles from the kids.

"Please, Snotlout, Stoick said he needed to rest." Fishlegs tried intervening. Hiccup was more than grateful for the somewhat pitiful attempt at cooling his attacker. Stoick gave a nonchalant huff.

"We need to obey the Chief, you great lump." Astrid's voice came crisp and cool. Hiccup was glad his reddening cheeks were hidden from view.

"Well, no one wants to hang around this pointless fool anyways." Snotlout proclaimed, and Hiccup heard the Gang walk away.

He was finally alone again. Well, except for that sheep that seemed to find Hiccup's failing efforts at acceptance entertaining. Although having been given orders to rest, Hiccup stayed awake underneath the blankets. Occasionally he could hear his father and the others crunching through walls of snow. At one point, Fishlegs came over again with the midday meal, but Hiccup feigned sleep. He was tired, but his wondering mind would not give him peace. He just could not sit idly by as his father grew farther and farther away from him.

But Hiccup knew what would please him, what would please any Viking. Hiccup heard a roar of triumph as the snowdrift was torn down and daylight entered the Great Hall. He imagined their deep shouts of approval were for him as a suitable idea entered his head. If there was one thing any Viking could be proud of, it was the slaughter of a dragon. Although it was now winter, and he was sure the dragons had retired for the season, Hiccup knew just where to find one.

!

After clearing the Great Hall, most Vikings found safe refuge from the cold winds in their homes. Most of the livestock, however, remained in the stone fortress. Berk was completely covered in ice and snow. The trees that Hiccup remembered drawing were buried and dead. Hiccup's journal had not fared well in his little escapade. It was wrinkled and bent as it had frozen and thawed while he slept. While most of the village went back to normal wintertime activities (that mainly consisted of traversing waist deep in snow), Hiccup was confined to his room, and someone was always on duty to watch him. He didn't like this new arrangement, especially when Spitelout was one day grudgingly set to the task. He had paced and bitterly mumbled all day and had a frantic talk with Stoick that night. Thankfully, he had not been put on Hiccup Watch since.

Hiccup was feeling better, but it seemed that Stoick would never let

him out of sight again. It was demeaning and cruel. To make it worse, the other kids were currently in training to become Berk's new fire patrol. After asking Gobber one day, his gruff babysitter replied, "Stoick's just afraid of ye gettin' hurt. He won' let anythin' happen to ye."

This answer did not satisfy him. Hiccup would ask Stoick himself, except he barely ever saw him, and when he did, the chief looked so mighty and abrasive, that Hiccup was kept silent by the mere sight of him. Stoick spoke not a single word to Hiccup since he had awoken. It was strange to suddenly be so afraid of his father. Hiccup tried to stay out of his way more for his own benefit. He didn't think he could handle one more disapproving scowl. Instead, Hiccup would often draw up his plan for getting to that dragon.

The Hideous Zippleback that had been captured that fall was still being held captive in the Kill Ring. After the big storm, Gobber had gone out to check on it, and sure enough, it had fallen into a hibernating sleep, keeping itself warm with inner fire. Thankfully for Hiccup, that meant he could continue on with his plan. Simply put, he was going to go on observation mode. He knew clearly that his size and skill was not anywhere relatively near where it should be in order to kill a dragon the traditional way. But perhaps by observing the beast, he could obtain some other information on killing it. Now all he had to do was sneak out of his room.

!

The opportunity came soon. It was a chilly winter afternoon, and Gobber was charged with Hiccup. In this certain instance, almost every Viking on the island was preoccupied, including Gobber. So the two were paired up in the Forge. Hiccup sat on a tool table with his notebook in his lap as he watched Gobber work at the anvil. The process the smith took when creating his current project (a broadsword for Spitelout) was intriguing, and Hiccup decided he enjoyed the pleasant warmth and metallic taste of the Forge's air.

However, sitting there all day had taken its toll on the curious boy, so he decided to wander into Gobber's work room. On the other side of the door sat a desk, a stool, and shelves of scrolls and various nick-knacks. Covering the desk were plans for various tools and weapons, but it seemed Gobber hadn't worked on anything new for a while. Hiccup sat on the stool and looked through the layers of pages on the desk. He gave a start when he detected movement by the door. But it was only Gobber.

"There ye are." Gobber puffed, wiping sweat from his brow. "Ye disappeared on me." He stood over Hiccup's shoulder and gazed down at the plans. "Looking at the old battle axe draw-ups? Well, ye aren't too bad of an artist yerself. I've snuck a peak at that there journal yer always carryin around. Maybe you could try mapping something out fer yerself."

Now there was an idea. Hiccup hadn't had any intention of creating weapons. But maybe there was a way to make something more suitable for himself to use. He glanced up at Gobber with a smile.

"Well, if yer occupied, I really need to deliver this sword to Spitelout. Do ye think ye could stay here for just a minute? I'll be

back soon. I trust ye not to be gettin' me in trouble by wonderin' off."

Hiccup sat patiently as Gobber took off his apron and wrapped up the new weapon.

"Did ye hear me, or what?" Gobber insisted.

"Er, yes. Sorry. I'll just s-stay here." Hiccup drummed his fingers on the desk as he spoke.

"Right then," Gobber nodded and left, shutting the door firmly behind him.

This was it. His chance to watch the dragon. Gobber said he would only take a few minutes, but considering the usually charismatic state he was in, it would surely take longer when he chatted with any and all passersby. However, getting to the Kill Ring and back within the hour might prove difficult in such weather.

Not wasting any time, Hiccup grabbed his winter vest and ran outside. Although the snow was up to his knees, the sky was clear and sunny. He smiled and started leaping through the snow towards the Ring.

Out of breath and sweating through his furs, he made it to the Ring and struggled to pull the lever that lifted the gate. He opened it just enough for him to roll through. Once inside, he stopped and stared. Lightly covered in snow, the ring was even more cold and dark thanks to the scorch and scratch marks covering the stone walls. The chained fencing that domed over the top of the pit did not give any comfort to Hiccup as he slowly inched his way towards the only occupied cage.

There were no windows or cracks in which to look through, so he would have to open the cage door. Hiccup guessed, however, that the dragon was surely still in his hibernated sleep—he hoped. Hiccup paused and closed his eyes. A dozen images of the nightmares he had encountered of fiery dragons raging at him flashed behind his closed eyelids. But he had to overcome his fear. He had to. If he was ever to become a Viking, he needed to be able to fight dragons.

Taking a deep breath, Hiccup lifted his shaking hands to the lever in front of him and pulled. He grunted as he put all his weight into the action, and the lever eventually fell forward. The mechanics raised the bolt on the door. Normally at this point a lively dragon would burst from his unlock imprisonment. The stillness that currently reigned encouraged Hiccup that the beast was indeed asleep.

Hiccup slowly stepped forward, placed his shoulder against the stone door, and heaved with all his might. The stone scraped against the icy floor as it wrenched open. Hiccup gave himself enough room for his head to fit through the crack. He peered in on the sleeping dragon, a sliver of light coming from the open door.

The Hideous Zippleback was indeed in hibernation. The creature almost appeared dead, except for a faint orange glow coming from all four nostrils. Hiccup gulped and tip-toed in. He didn't know if hibernating dragons could be easily woken, but he didn't want to take any chances. He crept only a few steps passed the door before slowly sitting down and taking out his journal. The light was dim, but

enough for him to start drawing the creature. He took in the dragon's talons, muscles, and wing joints. Anything that could potentially lead to help him kill one. When he thought he had observed sufficiently, he quietly slipped back out the door and closed it shut. Hiccup was just observing the dimness in the sky and wondering if Gobber had found him missing when a hard hand clasped his shoulder. The boy was forcefully spun around, and he found himself staring at the smith of Berk himself.

Gobber looked anything but pleased as he frowned at Hiccup.

"What." Gobber started with a growl. "In Thor's name do ye think yer doing."

The sternness in his words was unexpected from the usually jaunty man and was only emphasized by his steely gaze. Hiccup immediately averted his eyes.

"I-I just thought thatâ€¦!" Hiccup was nervous to admit his own self-doubts, even to such a man as Gobber. He bit his lip then continued anyways, "I just thought that if I could get over my fear of dragons, Stoick would want to talk to me!"

Gobber's face softened, and he released his hold on Hiccup. He gave the boy a quick look of pity before going over to lock the cage. He then pushed Hiccup along to the outside of the ring where he closed the gate. Hiccup wondered how much trouble he was in. Gobber turned back to the boy.

"Listen, I understand things are getting testy with yer father, but there is absolutely _no _reason fer ye to be in there with a beast alone. Ta be honest, when I followed yer tracks, I thought ye'd been eaten!" Gobber knelt beside Hiccup and more reassuringly placed his hand on the boy's bony shoulder. "And yer father cares fer ye. He jus has a lot to worry 'bout right now, and he wants ye ta be safe. The best way to make him proud right now would be ta keep from bein eaten."

Hiccup sighed and looked up at Gobber. "But how do I show him that I can be a good Viking, too? I want to help with the raids like everyone else!"

Gobber gave a moment of thought before answering. "Well, first thing's first would be to obey his orders-like not leaving your chaperone. The next would be ta continue being you. Their's Viking blood in ye-and _royal _blood at tha'! Ye'll turn out just fine. Give yerself time. Ye'll be the bravest Viking of them all someday."

"How do youknow?" Hiccup pouted.

"Because," Gobber grinned. "Even _I _wouldn't dare enter the cage of a sleepin' dragon."

That made Hiccup smile.

And with a grin, Hiccup led the way back to the forge talking of all of the new weapon ideas he had come up with while in the cage.

End

file.